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A NEW STRATEGY FOR NATO

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There are times in the history of military alliances when some long-latent problem reaches a point where a decision, no matter how painful, must be made. Such a time has arrived for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the compact of free nations that for 32 years has been the framework of security for Western Europe and the United States.

The Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites, banded together under the Warsaw Pact, have been growing stronger in military terms. Yet the Atlantic alliance cannot seem to agree on how best to respond. The Europeans have lost much of their old confidence in American leadership; they tend more and more to be preoccupied with narrow national concerns and to take independent positions on issues that demand a common allied strategy. This restiveness has even seeped down to the level of public opinion. In recent weeks, the political atmosphere in Western Europe has been roiled by mass demonstrations against allied plans for deploying new American missiles on European soil.

These bickerings and differences are symptomatic of a deeper problem. The military threat to Western Europe has changed — the result of new conditions inside the Soviet bloc that have changed Soviet perspectives. The Western alliance is organized around a strategy for yesterday's dangers. All these trans-Atlantic disagreements over force levels and weapons missions stem largely from inner doubts and plain confusion about their relevance to present needs.

The most likely threat to the Western alliance today is pointed not directly at Western Europe but, obliquely, across third-world areas like the Persian Gulf. What we need is a new strategy providing those regions with a defensive shield. This would best be done by the United States and Western Europe acting in concert. But if, as seems probable, the Europeans are unwilling or unable to increase their military potential for this purpose, the United States must act alone.

This will mean a smaller American contribution to the military defense of Western Europe, as we divert forces to the third world. The Europeans will be shocked, but the alliance will survive and emerge all the stronger for recognizing the realities of the 1980's. In fact, fear of facing up to reality will vitiate the partnership more surely than anything else.

It must be admitted, to start with, that, by and large, Western Europe and the United States bring differing viewpoints to the question of whether the times call for more détente or more defense.

Détente for Europe has meant new markets for trade with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, increased dialogue with the East and a chance to influence East-West relations independently of the United States. The Europeans have put emphasis on perpetuating détente despite the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and Moscow's blatant pressures on Poland. The very fact that the Polish workers dared to rebel and the Kremlin has been holding back from military intervention is seen by Europeans as deriving partly from the attitudes of détente acquired in the 1970's.

Most Americans, on the other hand, see détente more as a desirable principle than a working basis of foreign policy. We have supported détente publicly but we question it privately, tending to see it as having led to Soviet gains in Angola, Ethiopia, Southern Yemen, Nicaragua and Cambodia. We look on East-West trade with much less enthusiasm than the Europeans, reasoning that, from the Western standpoint, the impetus for such trade is political rather than economic. (Western Europe's trade with Communist countries accounted for only 4.9 percent of its total foreign trade in 1980; alternative markets could easily have been found elsewhere.) The European view that the Soviet leaders are sincerely committed to détente, if only because of their concern with the Soviet bloc's internal political and economic difficulties, gets a skeptical hearing in the United States.

There is, nonetheless, something to be said for the European analysis. The Kremlin's current difficulties could well be having some inhibiting effect. The Soviet leaders must be increasingly worried about the satellites' political reliability. Poland is only the most dramatic expression of this endemic problem; there are long-term forces undermining the foundations of socialism across a much wider spectrum within the Warsaw Pact. Each Eastern European leader must feel that his fate hinges to some degree on the outcome of the Polish drama. Tension within the Communist alliance is bound to increase. And whatever makes the satellites even less reliable will tend to limit Moscow's freedom of action toward the West.

The economic malaise spreading across the Soviet empire is just as serious in its implications. The problems of the Soviet-style planned economy, with its lack of individual incentive, have assumed formidable proportions. Growth rates are declining both in output and productivity. The Soviet leaders are caught between three competing needs — continued spending on the military, investment in plant and equipment, and a better break for the consumer — and there are no easy choices to be made.

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But a different analysis of Moscow's difficulties could lead to a conclusion far different from the one espoused by most Europeans. As economic requirements push up against military spending, and as political tensions within the Warsaw Pact grow more serious, the Soviet leaders could be tempted to establish footholds around the world before their military advantages ebb and before our renewed defense program takes effect. The objective, according to this "lash-out" theory, would be not only to win all they can while they can but to divert domestic attention from increased austerity at home.

The Russians could take military action in remote regions alone, but this would hardly achieve their objective. They could, as a second alternative, lash out on the central front in Europe, but that would be risky indeed. A third option, an attack on Europe's flanks, or on Iran or Pakistan, would also involve serious hazards. Thus, while the possibility of some desperate move of this nature cannot be ruled out entirely, it seems unlikely — at least during the next few years, when the Russians will almost certainly be faced with the unsettling difficulties of a succession to the aging leadership of Leonid I. Brezhnev and his men.

A fourth alternative seems more probable — a Soviet foreign policy not unlike the one we have seen for some years, combining aggressive opportunism in the third world with military intimidation and political-economic inducements in Europe.

There is now a question, however, about the European aspects of this policy. Except for the realm of strategic forces, the Russians' potential for intimidating Western Europe will lessen as their military buildup reaches the limits of their capacity and as the reliability of their East European allies becomes increasingly suspect. At the same time, Soviet inducements to Western Europe will look less appealing as the harshness of the Communist societies comes more to the surface in response to the buildup of internal pressures.

In the third world, on the other hand, the outlook for Moscow is more promising. In the wake of the Vietnam War, the United States offered no real opposition as the Soviet Union extended its influence over one third-world country after another. Our stiffer reaction to the invasion of Afghanistan took the Russians by surprise but is not likely to deter them in the future. They have seen little consistency in our foreign policy over recent years, and one grain embargo is hardly likely to persuade them that we will be as firm next time, especially since the embargo was lifted by President Reagan in response to pressure from the domestic farm bloc.

The Russians are likely to continue to seize opportunities to support and manipulate leftist factions in the third world. In some cases, these will be revolutionary elements seeking to take control, as in Angola in 1975. In others, they will be socialists in power who come under challenge from domestic opponents, as in Ethiopia in 1978. There will be blatant moves to install power from outside the country, as the Vietnamese and Russians did in Cambodia in 1978.

There are, it is true, some inherent limitations to this Soviet technique. Moscow's aid to its political protégés is almost entirely military in character. Lacking sufficient reserves of materials, money and know-how for the kind of economic programs that could meet the recipient countries' needs for economic growth, the Russians have rarely been able to establish close, long-term relations with their newfound friends. In the past 20 years, they have been ejected from China, Indonesia, Egypt, Sudan and Somalia, losing out in most cases to strong forces of nationalism.

Yet the Russians have always been willing to make a stab at controlling selected parts of the third world and cutting their losses, if necessary. And today there are two new factors at work. In Angola, Ethiopia and Cambodia, the Russians have left behind sizable surrogate forces, Cuban or Vietnamese. It would be much more difficult for these nations to escape from the Soviet camp than it was for the Egyptians and others. And in Nicaragua, we may have recently witnessed a new Soviet technique — meddling based on Libyan financing. If the Russians can induce Libya to fill the economic void in selected underdeveloped countries, their capability for intervention could be significantly enlarged.

Look, for instance, at what they might attempt from their position in Southern Yemen. By destabilizing Oman, on one side of Saudi Arabia, and Yemen, on the other side, they could outflank the Saudi regime and generate considerable pressure on that Government to amend its pro-Western posture. Soviet prospects in Iran after the death or exit of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini are even brighter. If the Communist Tudeh Party emerged even temporarily as the dominant Iranian political force, and if the Tudeh "invited" a Soviet military detachment into the country, Iran could be brought under Soviet hegemony. A subsequent march to the northern shores of the Persian Gulf would intimidate Saudi Arabia and place the flow of oil to the West in jeopardy.

Look, also, at the exposed position of several other nations to which we have formal or implied commitments. Pakistan has Soviet troops just across its border with Afghanistan and is frequently accused by the Russians of aiding the Afghan resistance. Thailand's territory has been violated by spillovers from the fighting in Cambodia. South Korea must worry constantly about Moscow encouraging the North Korean leader, Kim Il Sung, into another act of aggression.

If the Russians continue to discern few risks in such third-world adventurism, they surely will continue to make use of their opportunities. It is for these areas, therefore, that a new policy must be forged by the Western alliance, and primarily by the United States.

It must be our common purpose to create unacceptable risks for the Russians — to make the costs of aggression unacceptably high wherever our vital interests are involved. This is not to advocate universal intervention in troubled areas or a return to total containment of the Soviet Union. It suggests selective and determined resistance in areas of overriding concern.

Clearly, we have vital interests in the major oil-producing countries. There are many other suppliers of raw materials on whom we and our allies depend, and many of these countries are key markets for our exports. The Russians seek to drive a wedge between these countries and the West, to cut off our mineral supplies and to create strains within the Atlantic alliance by forcing each member to scramble to protect its own interests.

The Russians need not take direct military action to cut our supplies. They may influence a leftist-leaning government to do that; they may foment internal disorders or regional wars that will interrupt production and

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shipment. In anticipation of this kind of Soviet meddling, we must make sure they know that we are ready and capable of resisting their overtures and interventions.

Our resistance can take a number of forms — diplomatic, economic or military. In most instances in the third world, the tools of diplomacy and economic aid will be more applicable than military presence or combat. But diplomatic and economic leverage will be insufficient unless the Western alliance can present a united front and display a readiness to protect its interests with adequate military power.

In the Persian Gulf, clearly a nexus of the vital interests of the United States and its allies, it has become highly probable that we will need the capacity to at least threaten the use of force — and enough power in the region to make the threat credible. The Russians must be left with no doubts about our readiness to resist any attempt to alter the balance of power in this critical area. Only when they become convinced of our resolution and capacity will they see the costs and risks of overseas adventurism as being higher than in the past.

Our chances of drawing a line and holding it are good. In measuring risks against opportunities, the Russians will have to take their own lessening economic and political strength into account. The Russians are bogged down in Afghanistan; they are subsidizing Cuba, underwriting Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia and standing poised with 30 to 40 divisions on Poland's perimeter; surely they must think carefully before extending themselves further. A full range of responses to Soviet meddling in the third world has a better chance of success today than ever before.

We should encourage our European allies to participate in the development of new Western defenses in the third world. It will always be helpful politically to have a multinational force rather than one that is strictly American. French and British naval forces, and the 4,000-man French Army contingent posted in Djibouti, are the best candidates. But the Europeans have only limited potential for projecting sizable military power over long distances. The transport and support of any allied forces carried into action would have to come from the United States.

The rub is that this is bound to affect our military posture in Western Europe. The United States cannot maintain two armies and two air forces, one for the plains of Europe and one for deployment around the world; neither the American public nor the Congress would support that expense. Difficult as the decision would be, a reduction of our forces in Western Europe is an unavoidable component of a new strategy that in the end would enhance the security of both Europe and the United States.

The change would, of course, pose a variety of problems. Some of them are technical. The military equipment we need for remote regions is quite different from what we now have in Europe. If we are to transport tanks, artillery, armored personnel carriers and other such hardware to remote areas, they must be light and compact. Since we can't have two armies and two air forces, our troops in Europe must adapt their tactics to lighter and more mobile equipment. This means less dependence on massive firepower and stoutly defended positions and more reliance on mobility and maneuver. Instead of holding fixed front-line positions by firepower and armored defense, American ground units in Europe would be trained to move rapidly to where Warsaw Pact forces have been positioned for a breakthrough.

There are those who believe that such tactics of maneuver are more suited, in any case, to tomorrow's technology and battlefield environment. In any event, the alliance's military tactics would have to change appreciably if the United States retooled its ground forces to acquire a dual capability for Europe and for the third world. The forces of our European allies would have to be similarly reshaped — or they would have to think through a new role for themselves, complementing a lighter, more flexible American force.

Similarly, land-based American air power must be easily transportable around the world. The problem is not with the aircraft themselves but with the cumbersome support elements of spare parts, computerized testing equipment, technicians, and so on, that must follow along to keep the sophisticated aircraft flying. Switching to less sophisticated aircraft with more sophisticated weapons could make a big difference.

It would take years to develop and deploy these lighter forces and apply these new tactics. In the meantime, we could improve on our ability to move quickly to unexpected trouble spots by drawing upon equipment and personnel in Europe whenever they are closer to the scene.

In the best of all worlds, our European allies would accept the argument that the United States must take these steps even at the cost of doing less in Europe, and that they should compensate by taking on a larger role themselves. If they did not, in view of their disinclination to increase their defense spending, our best course would be to proceed independently, though after full explanation and consultation. To ignore the problem of continued Soviet interventionism in the third world would be shortsighted. To take on this new responsibility without making the necessary adjustments in Europe would be unrealistic.

Some feel that our military capabilities can be extended to the third world without having any great impact on our commitments in Europe; perhaps a small Rapid Deployment Force, as initiated by President Carter, would do the trick. It could — where the Soviet Union is not directly involved. But it would be patently inadequate in cases of Soviet or Soviet-sponsored military adventurism. The Cuban presence in Ethiopia and Angola is sizable and well equipped; a Soviet thrust into Iran would be massive. A commando force big enough only for putting out "brush fires" in the third world does not constitute a serious enough commitment to have a deterrent effect on Moscow.

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There are others who argue that if Washington reduced its military effort in the defense of Europe, the Europeans could drift into neutralism and accommodation with the Soviet Union. Indeed, as we have noted, there are increasingly vocal leftist factions in Europe that may be willing to sell out their heritage of freedom in just this way, but it would be surprising if this minority view prevailed. There is also the argument that this is no time to raise such a difficult new issue — we have enough problems within the alliance as it is. That is a reasonable principle, but the problem is that the threat of Soviet subversion in vital areas like the Persian Gulf will not go away. The alliance cannot remain strong if it chooses to ignore a critical threat to its survival.

The basic fault with our present alliance strategy is that it confuses preparedness for the most serious possible threat with preparedness for the most likely threat. Our focus for all of these past 32 years has been on the danger of Soviet conquest of Western Europe. Naturally, adequate defense against this possibility must remain among our top priorities. But the most likely danger today is the indirect one of Soviet attempts to extend control over the West's supplies of oil and other minerals and over its political and economic relationships with the third world. The old saying that the road to Berlin is through Baghdad is worth renewed consideration.

The Soviet Union, as we have seen, is facing a set of conditions, internally and externally, that will make it tempting for the Soviet leaders to improve their world position while they still can. The perilous uncertainties of an attack on Western Europe would make that a very difficult choice, to put it mildly, for any Soviet leadership. Yet the impulse to do something may be very strong. An effort to undermine the alliance by way of the third world will be a compelling alternative.

Facing up to this new challenge will test the Atlantic alliance, but the process of testing can also be one of reinvigoration. It can establish new criteria for the sharing of effort, new ability to adjust to change and a renewed sense of commitment to our basic objectives. Yes, there are risks that the alliance will not measure up, but avoidance of necessary risk has never been a sensible policy in the defense of freedom. ■